



By Rob O' Hara

During the height of my collecting days I had more than twenty video game consoles hooked up to a single television in my game room, ready to play at all times. This nightmarish feat of engineering required half a dozen A/V switch boxes, more power strips than anyone should safely daisy chain end to end, and an electrical engineering degree to figure out which combination of switches, buttons and knobs were required to get the right system to display in the right screen ratio at the right time. Many nights I spent more time wiring up my gaming systems than I did playing them.

If nothing else, Hyperkin's latest console, the RetroN 3, is a step in the right direction when it comes to console consolidation. The "3" stands for three systems, as the RetroN 3 can play Nintendo NES, Super NES and Sega Genesis cartridges. And "RetroN" stands for... I'm not sure. In fact, I'm not even sure how to pronounce it. Is it Reh-tron? Reetron? Retro-In?

The funkiness does not stop with the unit's logo. Inside the box you'll find a funky, rounded console that looks like a cross between a miniature hovercraft and a Roomba. (Note: despite repeated button mashing, I was not able to get the RetroN 3 to either levitate or vacuum my game room. Your mileage may vary.) The first thing you'll notice are the three cartridge slots on top of the system. The slots aren't labeled, but it's relatively easy to tell what goes where (from front to back it's SNES, Genesis, and NES). Directly in front of the slots sits the power button, the reset button, and a large, retro-looking dial used to select which cartridge slot is active. The next thing you'll notice are controller ports all over the place. The left hand side of the console houses two NES controller ports, the front has two spots for SNES controllers, and two Genesis controllers can connect to the right. I believe

the RetroN 3 holds the record for the most physical controller ports on any console I own.

Also inside the box you'll find a console, a power supply, two sets of video cables, and two wireless controllers. Noticeably missing are any instructions. The only documentation you'll find comes printed on the back of the system's box (in three languages). Anyone familiar with gaming consoles should have no problem connecting the RetroN 3 to a television, but if you're buying this as a holiday gift for a non-gaming friend, you may consider hooking it up for them as well.

About those wireless controllers; they're ridiculously light, and poorly designed. Each controller requires two (not-included) AAA batteries, which, once installed, will surely double the controller's weight. Because the controllers use infrared (IR) technology they must be pointed directly at the console, which seems to have a fairly narrow IR field.

To get the console to recognize the controllers you'll need to be directly in front of, and level with, the RetroN 3. If the console is sitting on a low shelf (or the ground) or you are more than six feet away from it, it won't recognize the controllers. Even if the wireless portion worked flawlessly, you would still be left with lightweight controllers with non-standard button mappings. Despite being laid out like Sega Genesis controllers, the buttons aren't mapped the way they should be. For Genesis games, the "A" button maps to "A", but the "B" button maps to "C" and vice-versa, a bizarre choice that will have veteran players smashing these controllers into pieces (which would not take much force). They also lack shoulder buttons, which means that you'll have to use the standard Genesis "C" and "Z" buttons as substitutes for the SNES games that require them. While the RetroN 3 lists the ability to use vintage controllers as

a feature, I'd say it's more of a requirement for anyone over the age of 5 planning on using the system for more than a single afternoon.

The rear of the RetroN 3 console has red and white (stereo) RCA audio jacks, along with both composite and S-Video ports. While the NES portion of the RetroN 3 does not support S-Video out, the SNES and Genesis do. Next to the power supply port is a small switch labeled "O/J".

This is a region



switch; the "J" stands for Japan, and the "O" either stands for "Original," "Other," or "Oh, this game's not from Japan." It is worth noting that along with NES, SNES, and Genesis games, the RetroN 3 is also capable of playing Famicom, Super Famicom, and Megadrive games as well (NTSC only, it seems).

The biggest issues most retro gamers have had with "Famiclone" systems are their compatibility and accuracy. Because the RetroN 3 is literally three consoles in one (a TRI-SYSTEM!)



I will address each one individually.

Historically, NES-clones have been disappointing for retro gamers. The reverse engineering of the original NES to a single chip (often referred to as a “Nintendo-on-a-Chip”, or “NOAC”) has led to distorted graphics, inaccurate sound, and random compatibility issues. In this regard, the RetroN 3 is the best clone I’ve seen to date. To the trained eye (or when placed directly next to an original NES) differences are obvious: graphics occasionally flicker, sound levels are off, and colors aren’t always represented 100% accurately. That being said, it looks better than my Yobo Famiclone I bought just a year or two ago, and it appears (at least with the latest version of the hardware) to be more compatible than past Famiclones. Castlevania III, a particularly difficult game for clone

systems to play (and a point of contention among gamers buying these systems) worked fine for me, and several



games that other clones have had issues with also appear to work on the RetroN 3. If you have a tattoo of Super Mario or a daughter named Zelda then, like all Famiclones, the minor inaccuracies of the RetroN 3 may drive you crazy. Games played on the RetroN 3 often do not look or sound identical as they do when played on a real NES. Then again, a real NES can’t play Genesis games, so there’s that. My kids, who are too young to remember the original NES, had no complaints about the system’s quality.

The original NES’s 16-bit big brother, the Super NES, may be the RetroN 3’s strongest suit. After trying half

a dozen different cartridges I found I had difficulty discerning any real difference between the RetroN 3 and the real thing. And while the console’s composite output is passable, running the SNES in S-video mode surpasses the output quality of the original console, delivering an uber-sharp picture with crisp colors. Don’t forget, because of the region switch on the back of the console and the absence of any regional lock tabs, you can play Super Famicom cartridges too.

The RetroN 3’s gaming trifecta is rounded out with a Sega Genesis slot, whose quality falls somewhere between the NES and SNES’s. Video-wise, Genesis games, again thanks to the system’s ability to output via S-video, looks fantastic. Where the console falls flat is in the sound department. Like most 16-bit consoles and computers, the Genesis used multiple voices to create the music and sound effects you’re used to hearing, and for some reason the volume levels of each individual voice seem to be out of whack. This odd quirk manifests itself in the console by playing some sound effects louder than they should be played, and some music channels more quietly.

Like the NES portion, I would say the Genesis portion of the console is “good enough” for people looking to have a good time and aren’t too critical of 100% accuracy. Gamers who haven’t touched a Genesis in ten or twenty years likely won’t notice the difference.

While testing random games out on the system with my kids, one of them accidentally dropped one of the wireless controllers and broke it. I can’t stress how much better the RetroN 3 performs by using original, vintage controllers. If I were picking one of these up for myself or as a gift and I didn’t already own some, I would definitely purchase some vintage controllers to go along with it. While I haven’t had any performance issues with the console itself, the thing is crazy light and the company doesn’t have a great track record when it comes to quality control. I would definitely consider purchasing the RetroN 3 from a reputable dealer with a return policy. My console was shipped to me from Video Game Trader and I didn’t have any issues, but the product has received several one star reviews on

Amazon from people who received non-working consoles.

It is worth noting that to date, two versions of the RetroN 3 have been released. On the original version of the hardware you’ll find the “RETRON” logo in white and red and the words “3 IN 1 SYSTEM” printed on the front of the box. The newer version of the RetroN 3 console has the word “RETRON” written in blue, with the phrase “TRI-SYSTEM” appearing on the front. The newer version of the console has received a few technical upgrades (including improved NES compatibility), so if you’re shopping for a RetroN 3, you’ll want to track down the newest revision.

Over the past month I’ve had Hyperkin’s RetroN 3 hooked up in my game room and have been getting feedback from those who have played it. My kids (ages 7 and 10) and their cousins think the fact that the console can play NES, SNES, and Genesis games “is awesome.” None of them complained about the graphics or sound. All of them either complained about or became frustrated with the wireless controllers, and all of them enjoyed the experience more when using vintage controllers.

From my adult friends I received generally positive feedback as well. My wife, who grew up playing lots of Super Mario Bros. and Tetris on the original NES, could find no flaws with the system. Neither could the rest of my non-gaming friends, all of whom thought the system was worth the investment. My hardcore gaming friends were the most critical of the system, citing some of the minor video and audio inaccuracies previously mentioned. Generally speaking, people’s overall happiness with the RetroN 3 seems to be directly related with how accurate they expect it to perform.

If you’re a diehard gamer who already owns the three consoles the RetroN 3 aims to replace, perhaps this console is not for you. If you are just getting into retrogaming, have limited shelf space to dedicate to gaming consoles, or are looking for a retrogaming gift during the holidays, you should definitely look into the RetroN 3. It’s the best Famiclone on the market today hands down, and my son is already vying to have this one relocated to his bedroom.